

Richard Wright, Claudia Jones, Cedric Robinson, and Robin D.G. Kelley, to name only a few, would have certainly much to say on the origins of the Black Atlantic.

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Lyman L. Johnson, *Workshop of Revolution: Plebeian Buenos Aires and the Atlantic World, 1776-1810* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Workshop of Revolution concludes with notable success Johnson's lengthy work on the late Spanish colonial artisans of Buenos Aires. In this book, he reconstructs the lives of many artisans and of more widely defined plebeian groups. He traces the attempts of plebeians to organise guilds and analyses the failure of guilds compared with those elsewhere. He studies the urban labour market enumerating the multiple ways slaves were utilised in a non-plantation economy. He addresses many other cognate topics touching on popular consumption and standards of living: diet, prices of consumer goods, housing and rents, monetary wages and real wages. The book divides into two parts; the first addresses the period 1776-1805, and the second the run-up to the independence struggle from the British military occupation of June-August 1806 to the aftermath of the revolution of 25 May 1810. The first part of the book deals with the politics of guild formation and presents most of the data on popular living standards. The second deals principally with the expansion of public sector spending through the formation and consolidation of the urban militia. Johnson argues that the populace played a central political role in the revolutionary period but he also addresses the activities of various political leaders. He credits the plebeians with an autonomous role in resisting the British in 1806, in repulsing the second British attack in mid-1807, and in triggering the May Revolution of 1810 itself. He notes the dashing of popular aspirations in late 1811 when an attempted mutiny by the plebeian dominated Patricios Regiment was quashed.

Striking novelties of the book include Johnson's analysis of housing in Buenos Aires and his work on slaves. He depicts an urban environment in which extraordinarily high rents prevailed. He provides many illustrations of the hiring out of labour by small slave owners and the ubiquitous functions of slaves as imports of slaves climbed steeply from the 1790s. Johnson has collected impressive data on prices and wages and digested a mass of archival material to create fascinating anecdotes on people of high and low social status. I learned a great deal about the purchase and hiring out of slaves and about the rumoured slave revolt of 1795; I learned more too about the relations between critical figures of the revolutionary era like the Francophile Santiago Liniers and his nemesis Martín de Álzaga representing pro-Spanish interests. The book is the most

important study for some time on subjects dealing with the consolidation and decline of the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata.

Johnson has written about a fairly small group, principally silversmiths and shoemakers. Their inability to establish guilds reflected the protean character of the labour market formed by migrants of different origins: Spanish Americans from the interior, Spanish immigrants, and African slaves. Data on real wages show a steep climb in 1786-1794, followed by a haphazard but steep decline in 1796-1804, and a renewed steep rise in 1804-1810. The trends are explained during the third period by rising public expenditure on the militia. Conditions during the two earlier periods are perhaps less convincingly analysed: the reader is left to surmise rather than shown that falling real wages from the mid-nineties to 1804 reflected the impact of slavery. Fluctuations in foreign trade in a period of prolonged foreign war (as occurred during World I and World War II) affected the supply of imported consumer goods; the author does not explore possible links between fluctuations in Atlantic commerce and popular living standards. An obvious omission (acknowledged by the author) concerns data on meat consumption—an issue as important to the cost of living during this period as in many later ones.

By illustrating the importance of slavery in the economy of Buenos Aires, the author opens up the often recognised but perennially neglected topic of the black population of Buenos Aires. In most respects (except for slavery), the book leaves an impression of late colonial Buenos Aires as a city betraying the traits that grew stronger during later periods. It could already be characterised as cosmopolitan and “liberal,” particularly in the sense that it possessed a fluid, highly mobile labour market. Labour fluidity and mobility stood out among the conditions inhibiting the growth of guilds in Buenos Aires. Johnson illustrates the seductive power of public sector employment, another persistent feature of later periods (even today). Public sector employment begs the questions of patronage and clientelism, but would have detracted from Johnson’s emphasis on popular political autonomy. The author hints at the reasons for the attractions of public sector employment by observing that few artisans possessed more than their hand tools: enlisting in the public sector therefore became one of the few available avenues for self-advancement. Around 1810, manufacturing in Buenos Aires already appeared at the brink of transition from pre-capitalism but none subsequently occurred, as artisans found their routes to new forms of organisation blocked. Except for slavery, I am impressed by the resemblances between Buenos Aires during the late colonial period and during later times.

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